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Published in:
Urban Research & Practice

DOI:
[10.1080/17535069.2016.1149978](https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2016.1149978)

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hasanov, M., & Beaumont, J. (2016). The value of collective intentionality for understanding urban self-organization. *Urban Research & Practice*, 9(3), 231-249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2016.1149978>

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To cite this article: Mustafa Hasanov & Justin Beaumont (2016) The value of collective intentionality for understanding urban self-organization, Urban Research & Practice, 9:3, 231-249, DOI: [10.1080/17535069.2016.1149978](https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2016.1149978)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2016.1149978>



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The value of collective intentionality for understanding urban self-organization

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Urban self-organization (USO) is an important topic within the field of contemporary participatory planning. This article aims to investigate the role of certain socio-psychological traits embedded within the notion of USO. We will argue that USO builds upon on the relationship between processes of community organizing, socio-spatial proximity and, most intriguingly, collective intentionality. The intellectual and sensory experience of self-organizing processes is examined through the help of three spatially anchored community initiatives within The Netherlands. We suggest that our investigation into collective intentionality of USO has a promising role in setting the future research agenda for supporting a more inclusive planning theory and practice.

Keywords: urban self-organization; collective intentionality; citizen participation; urban governance

Introduction

In the never-ending debate of public participation in planning, self-organization stands out as an innovative approach addressing bottom-up community involvement. If we believe that modern day participatory processes rely on the self-organized capacities of local communities, then perhaps USO can be considered as an important element in the discussion of participatory processes in the future. Whereas earlier work published on self-organization in planning (Boonstra and Boelens 2011; Portugali 2011) paved the way for its growing impact in theory and practice, little attention is given to the socio-psychological traits, such as collective intentionality, that are related to the concept. The purpose of this article is to establish why and how urban self-organization (USO) matters for understanding participatory planning processes, where individual action gains social support and in the context of everyday practices becomes part of the social reality. To this end we propose a definition of USO as an intentional placed-based and spatially anchored, grass-root and collective phenomenon. USO addresses context-specific issues experienced within communities and channels these issues in a non-orthodox manner into bottom-up governance arrangements.

Self-organization is a spontaneous and emergent process, where order arises from a random or almost chaotic system – an explanation strongly rooted in the hard sciences. This view on self-organization has also been adopted in spatial planning, where discourses on the concept also refer to USO as the emergent and cybernetic property of adaptive complex systems (Portugali 2008, 2011). In an attempt to enrich the content of USO with notions of democratic decision-aiding in the agenda of new urban governance measures,

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Boonstra and Boelens (2011) explore in addition the role of USO via actor-network theory (ANT). Their deployment of ANT, however, arguably does not stray so far from the realms of complexity theory and non-linearity within the context of urban planning. They claim that USO is capable of addressing the dynamics of social interaction in governance measures and outline the inefficiencies of the participatory planning approaches in the recent Dutch experience. Such exploration of USO underlines heavily the capacity of public administration practices to absorb innovative, bottom-up and citizen-driven initiatives. However, such argumentation arguably displays a certain lack of acknowledging of USO as an act of performance as opposed to USO as a preconditioned setting.

While we hold the above-mentioned academic perspectives in high esteem, here we suggest the view that self-organization is an ongoing, community-based and social phenomenon loaded with socio-psychological implications for public participation. Self-organization should not be accepted as an axiomatic truth in urban planning that is explained solely by the complex dynamics of urban networks. We would therefore like to build an alternative vision of the processes of USO which goes beyond the reach of a complexity perspective.

We see processes of USO as assets of participatory thinking that refer to perceptions of social capital and community-based action (Alinsky 1971; Block 2008; Fairbanks 2009; Fuchs 2002, 2006; Haardt 2010; Jamoul and Wills 2008; Miller and Nicholls 2013; Nicholls, Beaumont, and Miller 2013; Putnam 2000) which, as we see it, is not sufficiently explored from a planning perspective. USO also requires consideration of the community rooted processes and informal relationships, embedded in a wider stream of urban flows (Amin 2007, 2013; Amin and Wilkinson 1999; Agrawal et al. 2008; Batty 2012). The importance of USO, we claim, arises from the rootedness of USO in collective intentionality (Bratman 1993; Searle 1995, 2006) as an innovative way to understand contemporary participatory approaches.

One of the foremost reasons for our positioning of USO is that the debates within cognitive and behavioral systems (Bratman 1993; Fuchs 2002; Searle 1995, 2006; Skorupski 2006) are replete with discussions of self-organization and cognitive representation but not clearly linked with the performances of socio-spatial realities. Since constructing civil society is about creating stability in the social realm (see Hindriks 2013), the question of self-organization at a higher than personal level, in our case, at a specific geographical or institutional scale, is the main thrust of our approach.

We propose that in order to better understand bottom-up, participatory processes, one needs to rediscover the meaning of self-organization in governance, not from a structural but rather from a phenomenological perspective. In this sense we conceptualize citizen participation as a process dealing with collective 'intelligence' that first occurs in the minds of individuals and is then reflected in individual or collective social performances. The power of collective social performance lies in their potential to launch and sustain an effective, inclusive and proactive community based, local or sectoral civic activity. In this line of argumentation, USO relates also to the sensory experience of participatory processes, where individual action acquires social support and in the context of everyday practices becomes part of the social reality.

The article is divided into three main parts. Following the introduction, we offer a short methodological overview of the research. Then, we identify the key theoretical concepts which we use to build our argument that processes of USO are built upon on the relationship between processes of community organizing, socio-spatial proximity and collective intentionality. Finally, we examine the key challenges that processes of USO pose in spatial planning based on empirical evidence from case studies in The

Netherlands. We highlight certain opportunities for exploration of USO within urban research and practice in the future.

Method and approach

The research design was divided into two main stages: an extensive desk-study and field research. The comprehensive desk-study charted self-organization in a wide spectrum of academic fields. This resulted in the weighing up of several different arenas of inquiry – and their critical conceptual interlinks – for constructing our argument. These arenas included reflection of participatory practices in planning, the origin of the processes of USO, self-organizing capacities of communities, the role of socio-spatial proximity in explaining societal action and the role of collective intentionality in underlining the processes of USO.

In order to examine these areas, the empirical foundation of our research made use of three case studies. The data we present emerge from semi-structured interviews with key representatives of three distinct civic initiatives and a local government representative. Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed and rendered anonymous. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insight into the reality of the initiative and also to trace how the initiatives relate to institutional bodies. In order to enrich the information received by the semi-structured interviews, we also made use of secondary data collection based on traditional and social media. While a case study approach cannot account for a comprehensive generalization of USO in different socio-spatial settings, we refer to the case studies as valuable vignettes of the conceptual issues we are exploring on USO.

Notwithstanding these limitations, we are confident that our approach represents a new direction in a better understanding the role of USO in governance. The methodological implications of this research are valuable for raising a discussion about the features and nature of USO as an integral, innovative and creative element in the future of planning theory and practice.

The participatory planning paradigm

Several theoretical strands are traceable in the existing work devoted to public participation in urban governance. With regard to citizen participation in the last half century we have witnessed calls indicating the role of citizens in decision-making (Arnstein 1969); empowering the disadvantaged by means of community organizing (Alinsky 1971); a debate on democratization and social capital in understanding civic engagement on account of deliberative decision-making to tackle the dialectics of the participation problem (Fung 2004). Variations on a theme of participation and communicative action in governance cross the frontiers of many disciplines where human/ governance interaction is observed (cf. Adamson 2010; Foster-Fishman, Pierce, and Van Egeren 2009; Hartmann 2012; Healey 1998, 2002; Healy 2009; Innes and Booher 2004; Lombard 2013; Ohmer 2008; Silver, Scott, and Kazepov 2010; Stewart 2007; Yang and Pandey 2011).

Despite its length and breadth, the literature engaged with citizen participation has created a slightly disappointing perception of participatory ideology. Shipley and Utz (2012) conclude that nobody can judge the fairness of public participation due to the dynamic state of society and its institutionalization. In her influential article Day (1997) refers to participatory planning approaches as an assembly of essentially contested issues because each participatory process is unique to its conditions.

Disentangling citizen participation would require moving away from the view of participatory planning as a liability that has to occur. Kweit and Kweit (2007) suggest that the efficacy of participation lies in its intimacy and symbolic role rather than the related procedural activities.

Self-organization and participation

In order to discuss the importance of USO in participatory politics we investigate self-organization in its socio-psychological features and the collective performance of individuals. The main objective is that self-organization cannot be seen as a predetermined or centrally coordinated method of participatory action. Acknowledging the nonlinear character of USO in participatory practice is not new (Portugali 2008, 2011; Rauws 2015; Roo, Hillier, and van Wezemael 2012). Recently, Boonstra and Boelens (2011) suggest that the socio-spatial relevance of USO has already been praised as a solution for easing contested participatory practices via the emergence of so-called new collectives (see also Boonstra 2015). While this argument calls for direct effect-causality linkages between citizen participation in urban politics explained through the social physics of the urban, it keeps self-organization locked in the debris of complexity theories. The theoretical alliance backing this argument places the potential self-organized elements of urban governance in a pre-determined 'algorithmic' relationship. While this placing might be suitable for measuring the performance of self-organization in some kind of evaluation criteria, it does not offer an outlook on how and why self-organization matters.

Basics of self-organization

It is important to think of USO as an intentional placed based and spatially anchored collective *modus operandi* gathered around the idea of citizen involvement in urban planning in a non-orthodox manner. Wagenaar (2007) argues that citizen participation can be considered as the sum of its hardware and software. The hardware is the institutional framework of public administration and the software is the experience of ordinary citizens and their interaction with decision-makers. Analyzing the software of citizen participation contributes to the unravelling of the complexity of contemporary decision-making. Inspired by this argument, we believe that the processes of USO could be an important asset in the inventory of the software of citizen participation.

Processes of USO are not charted by strict structural norms and rely on proactive action toward a collective social performance. The core of USO is seen as a consensual balance between notions of spatial proximity, community organizing and collective intentionality. This triple equation is largely characterized by the self-emerging awareness of individuals that share a specific context. Such awareness of the surrounding world relates to personality traits, such as moral obligations and consciousness, which are understood in a different manner by each individual. The balance and moral outcome of this awareness-sensitivity-consciousness interrelationship in our view triggers the self-organizing capacities of individuals. Once captured in collective means of action, the processes of self-organizing lead to spontaneous collective performances driven by collective intentionality. The ability of individuals to experience the world and assert rational control of their actions collectively is at stake.

We are, moreover, concerned with the place USO has in shaping the expressive cultural attributes of contemporary planning processes (see Figure 1). We try to show that the processes of USO shape a notion of urban planning that combines different

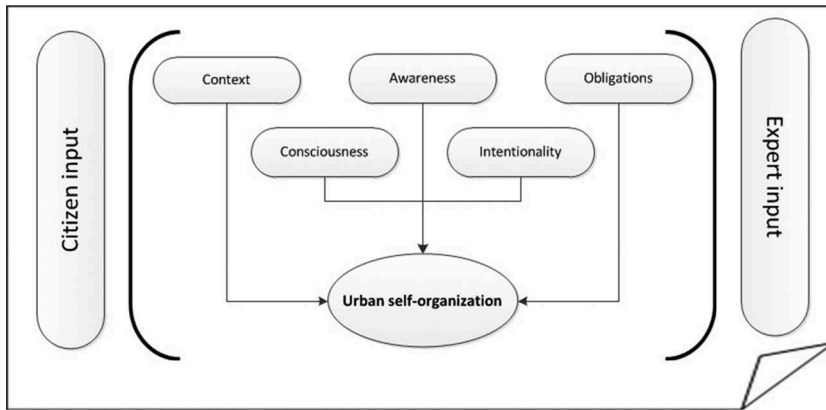


Figure 1. The position of urban self-organization (USO) in the interface between expert planning and citizen-led planning interventions.

Source: The authors

governance approaches. USO marks the interface between the technocratic expert view on planning and the citizen input into contemporary planning processes.

How we understand informal citizen and formal/expert relations depends on the scale of involvement of citizens, from a small group or a larger collective that strives for change. Involvement or commitment to a goal depends largely on the individual's values and norms and, therefore, a sensible awareness about certain aspect of the environment. Consciousness here refers to the relationship between the mind and the body through representation of an individual in everyday life and personal know-how. The similarity of personal experiences and common goals can influence the creation of intentional states, which can relate to actions. Individuals who share the same beliefs and norms can bond in spatially anchored social organizations and generate collective forms of action, backed by certain collective intentions.

It is essential to consider self-organization as a process of constant interface between actors from a social science perspective, rather than adopting a definition of USO as a hard 'tool' for planning practice. By doing so USO pulls together a wide range of conceptual frameworks and a shared vocabulary, stretching from the language of synergies and dissipative systems, and as we shall see, to the field of self-creation, social capital, beliefs and even spirituality.

Moving beyond complexity

Self-organization is neither a novel nor an isolated concept in the field of academic thinking. Self-organization refers to the evolutionary dynamics emerging out of the chaotic behavior of the elements in a system that aim to achieve equilibrium without external force (Ashby 1962; Jantsch 1980). This view on self-organization has gained recognition within the realms of social sciences, including planning (Doak and Karadimitriou 2007; Holling and Sanderson 1996; Karadimitriou 2010; Portugali 2011). While the world of physics and biology hardly can or should be translated to the realm of the social sciences (Flyvbjerg 2001), the complexity of self-organization, by analogy, could apply to the complex analytic reasoning of human actions. In this train of thought, we need to move beyond current intellectual conventions.

We will therefore elaborate on three main theoretical considerations of USO that constitute our argument: community organizing, spatial proximity and collective intentionality. We believe that the combination of these three pillars is essential to better understand the role that processes of USO play in planning.

The potential of community organizing

The literature on community organizing provides interesting insights on the processes of USO, particularly the work of Saul Alinsky. Alinsky (1971) argues that citizens are trying to establish new civic formations through a process of combining experience and knowledge that are detectable in their network, but also linked to personal qualities such as freedom of action and self-realization. Community organizing refers to the possibilities for individuals to initiate an action as an occurrence of interpersonal relationship with other individuals. The stress is on the relationships between citizens and highlights the pathways by which community action is created. To a certain extent, the outcome of community organizing is circulation of social capital in various forms (Putnam 2000).

Instead of drowning in lengthy intellectual debates on social capital, however, we will focus on the socio-psychological aspects of social capital that are essential for understanding the processes of USO. Hypothetically, creation and circulation of social capital goes hand-in-hand with the internal self-organizing capacities of the community. Social capital refers to the generated trust, norms and networks, which ordinary people establish by engaging in social activities. Those activities generate information exchange and interact in horizontal and vertical structures. Hitherto, an exploration of the social capital relates to the variety and the connectivity of individuals and their willingness to contribute for a more accountable and sustainable future (Block 2008). Social capital as such often is taken as a personal asset, rather than a result of a collective effort that can contribute to clarifying the processes of USO.

Social capital closely relates to a term known as *social self-organization*. Fuchs (2002) reports that social self-organization relates to the capacity of social structures to circulate and maintain the information they carry. Processes of self-organization have the ability to meld social capital into the social relations inherent in context-specific social structures, such as local communities or fledgling social movements. Those are usually located within particular places and raise the question of civic involvement in particular social formations. Reliance on community organizing also suggests that communities can emerge in the formation of new urban social movements, by occupying contested spaces in vocally addressing issues of social and/or spatial justice. This emergence can reveal interesting insights into the processes of self-organization. For instance, ‘the right to the city’ movement can be seen as a collective intention that relies on the internal capacities of suppressed communities to express their opinion in the public domain. Similar collective performances in contested urban spaces can be explained as an ideological carrier of change that relies on self-organized action within society.

Arguably, USO can be linked with every-day practices that are not related strictly to authoritarian norms and limitations. Some authors (Haardt 2010; Sandercock 2006) link the perception of sacral spaces with common-sensical knowledge and spiritual dwelling. Social practices inspired by spiritual intent can provide valuable input in penetrating the processes of self-organization in governance arrangements. Jamoul and Wills (2008) elaborate on spiritual virtue as the central component of the social foundation of civil society, civil engagement and politics combating urban injustices. Their example of London Citizens’ (cf. Herman et al. 2012) (now Citizens

UK) as a broad-based organization notable for the role of faith in politics refers to the changing attitudes of individuals and the creating of their own world. The ‘creation’ of proactive participation here, based largely but not exclusively on faith and spirituality, can be seen as a self-organizing response to the desires and the capacities of citizens to contribute and to be part of processes of ‘creation’ by cerebral acts in their own environment. Some authors (Beaumont 2008, 2010; Beaumont and Baker 2011; Cloke, Beaumont, and Williams 2013; Molendijk, Beaumont, and Jedan 2010) argue that incorporation of faith in the light of community organizing and urban social movements carries strong implications for socio-spatial justice. Dependence on acts of spirituality can be seen as an original outreach method to marginalized minorities that are usually difficult to engage and share very little in common. In the long term this dependence can associate with ideals of equity and moral commitment of individuals in governance arrangements, which is a central point in USO.

The role of proximity

Processes of USO can provide a foundation for engaging different social actors, sharing particular social and spatial contexts that otherwise cannot operate together in the urban sphere. While discussing the importance of socio-spatial proximity in the processes of USO, we distinguish between geographical and social proximity. Both relate to notions of shared attitudes and interaction, but the former is concerned with the physical proximity of actors, while the latter does not necessarily relate to physical attributes but also to intellectual attitudes.

Proximity deals with processes of learning, knowledge exchange and distribution that occur in shared spaces. The richness of self-organizing processes is tied to the perception of connectivity that individuals share. Social interaction within daily routines can establish a sense of similarity that affects personal and collective enactment. Agrawal et al. (2008) summarize that spatial and social proximity facilitate knowledge exchange that can relate to a state of interdependence where people are willing to share more skills and information with each other. In other words, being close by provides a stage for expressing opinion within communities.

Co-operative learning and sharing knowledge, through formal and informal institutions, can also be seen as an important feature of socio-spatial proximity. Knowledge transfer is crucial for conceptualizing the imaginary of an urban future where cities can be seen as relational entities tangled in multiple socio-spatial webs of information (Amin 2013). Duranton and Puga (2004) consider the urban structure as a conglomeration of three distinctive foundations based on sharing, matching and learning. On this basis we can suggest that USO is a characteristic of a context-rich environment where information exchange occurs intensively based on socio-spatial proximity.

The significance of USO builds upon levels of similarity and the social interaction of individuals that can be assumed sometimes to also exhibit a spatial dimension. We argue though that USO is not just about shared presence in space, but also about expressing social belonging to specific causes that may have overlapping spatial connotations. Social belonging to a particular cause requires deeper understanding of the interpersonal relations embedded in a social formation. In order to establish a link between social belonging that is assigned to a cause and the aspects of involvement leading to citizen participation, the next section borrows terminology broadly used in the analytical tradition of philosophy of mind.

USO and collective intentionality

Our originality in this article lies in conceptualizing USO as a form of collective action where individuals collectively indicate belonging to a particular cause, rather than acting on their own. Departing from the point that USO can bring flexibility in governance by relative autonomy of action and low levels of managerial control, we contend that there is a need to explore the integral socio-psychological aspects of the process. The bulk of the existing literature on self-organization in planning does not sufficiently explain how and why citizens express their desires in grievances and collective forms of action. We link USO with certain anthropological discourses that depict the rational representation of social reality, which might be the key to disentangle processes of participatory action. More specifically, we turn to the issue of collective intentionality that can be of a great value to the further discussion on USO and planning.

While interest in collective intentionality is relatively recent (Searle 1995) it can be traced back to the work of the political philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau on the *general will* and even earlier to the ancient philosophers. Collective intentionality characterizes a phenomenon prompted by the casual consciousness and volition that occurs when two or more people strive in a particular course of action. The basic assumption of an intentional action is that it exercises a voluntary control by expressing a wide array of cognitive practices and conscious awareness (Levy 2013). Intentional action is essential for individuals and their relations in social forms of everyday life. James and Nahmias (2004) argue that the moral responsibility of a person can clarify, recognize and attribute desires to larger groups of individuals in justifying collective action.

Intentions simply refer to the action of directing our minds to achieve self-perceived goals or objectives. Intentions show a particular concern for the future. Every individual has a unique set of intentions, which also can be shared with others. If such ‘sharing’ occurs, there is a chance that a mutual form of action based on collective forms of intentionality will appear. This means that collective intentions can absorb processes of social embeddedness, that is, a dependence of a phenomenon on its environment in self-organized grassroots actions.

Collective intentions are a logical sequence of individual intentions and their mutual relation addresses the issue of the plurality of intentionality (Bratman 1993). However, plural intentions do not necessarily reside in collective agencies. The extent to which intentions can evolve into collective action depends on the level of reciprocal sharing that individuals perform. The concept of sharing therefore has a central role for explaining collective intentionality. Shared intentions (Bratman 1993) assist the potential satisfaction of each individual’s action. Shared intentions are an amalgam of singular intentions that provide a possible means for consensus making and cooperation in a particular context. Accordingly, shared intentions are the backbone that encloses the processes of social belonging and accomplishment of a deliberate goal.

Patterns of collective intentionality are evident when a group possesses more than a singularly identifiable ‘mind’. Groups are forms of collective distinctiveness and it is certainly possible that intentionality is not merely a characteristic of groups. Intentionality can occur in a singularity but where it seeks recognition within a group in order to attain collective features that will make it count (Searle 1995, 2006). For example, a neighborhood cleaning day is a rather isolated event that occurs at a neighborhood scale but it arises from the scale of individual awareness and intentionality that seeks collective operationalization. Collective intentionality can be extrapolated not only from the intrinsic characteristic of the individuals within a group, but also from the extrinsic properties of an

intentional state (Tollefsen 2002). Whether or not the latter is an element of the existing socio-cultural or physical environment, psychological interpretations of social reality are crucial for developing an intentional entity, in determination of real-life actions. Within this line of argumentation, it can be assumed that the processes of USO are a mandate holder of collective intentionality which can be discussed in analyzing the groundwork of participatory practices.

In the next section we show that USO cannot rely on a traditional actor/agency model while reflecting the dynamics of social reality in planning. The processes of USO are a carrier of socially constructed collective intentionality, which relies on the interpersonal behavior and shared human action. USO does not rely solely on the carriers of collective intentionality in considering public participation. In order to understand USO, we need to analyze the other two elements that it embodies – the idea of community building and proximity. The combination of these three conceptually interrelated components suggests that civic engagement relies on pro-active public conduct and shared values, expressed in terms of spatially anchored collective intentionality.

Interpreting USO

We have so far outlined the agenda of USO in terms of intellectual notions. In the next section we examine the three theoretical standpoints developed earlier with empirical evidence from three case studies within The Netherlands. The case studies are drawn on selectively to illustrate the three theoretical standpoints. The case studies are selected on several criteria – socio-spatial scale, field of activity, level of citizen participation and their relative autonomy from traditional governance frameworks (see Table 1). These examples share certain similarities, especially in the relatively independent manner they have been

Table 1. Summary of the case studies.

	Focus	Underlying motivation	Socio-spatial structures	Relation to the public domain
<i>Rotterdamers in Actie</i>	Resident involvement in urban renewal practice. Anti-gentrification community group	To serve in favor of the marginalized and underprivileged in housing governance	Distorted. A platform of affected individuals and volunteers with a core-group of main activists	Sector-based social organization, partly recognized by local government; highly contested
<i>Selwerd Eetbare Straat</i>	Establishing a community garden in a downgraded neighborhood	Getting to know the neighbors; social cohesion; livable environment	Limited. Social gardening team (neighbors) devoted to having better quality of life	Praised by local government for originality and successful project of bottom-citizen energy
<i>Open Hof</i>	Shelter for homeless or people in need	Providing spiritual support in assisting troubled individuals in matters of daily life	Shared. Formation based on faith and spirituality connotation, run by volunteers	Relative autonomy from the local government, yet institutionalized in due course

initiated and their means of collective performance. But there are differences too. In particular, the cases vary in terms of the way they have been treated and absorbed by local government institutions.

The analysis of the cases follows the three pillars set in the theoretical framework, namely: philosophies of community building, the role of proximity in energizing collective performance and the place of collective intentionality in triggering community action.

USO as community organizing

One of our deliberate efforts looked at community building as an analytical device of USO. To an extent the activities carried out by the selected collectives refer to processes of community organizing. For example, an important element in the emergence of the *Rotterdamers in Actie* (RIA) hinged on its stock of Alinsky-style community organizing. In fact, during an interview an activist member of RIA referred several times to Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* as a source of inspiration for what the platform stands for and what it does.

RIA became an influential resident platform mainly due to the willingness and intentions of the pioneering group of activists who spread knowledge and experience to underprivileged members of the society. These activities resulted in the formation of a new community attitude that aims to support underprivileged residents in collective community action. Community organizing by various means referred to the opportunities to initiate more informal rather than managerial activities within the communities. By providing various services to members of different communities, RIA highlighted areas for capacity improvement for the local institutional actors, such as housing associations and municipalities. RIA reached a stage where it was recognized not only by the citizens but also seen as a societal partner by various institutional bodies.

The case of *Selwerd Eetbare Straat* (SES) is an illustration where a neighborhood with relative social fragmentation can benefit from USO by means of community-organizing.

We as neighbors here, we do not really have many contacts, so I thought that it will be great to create a space where you feel 'alive' with each other. It is good for your own feelings; to create something and it is good for your self-confidence; to do something together with neighbors. (Initiator, SES)

Gardening was perceived as a self-organizational capacity of residents involved in creation of a more livable environment. Expertise in gardening was not required to be part of the project, instead gardening was used as a tool to re-connect the local community. Deeds of self-organization were acknowledged in the intention to foster the connectivity, community feelings and to enhance social cohesion by collective efforts.

The ethics of harmony, self-realization and trust between the residents were also evident in the self-organized performance of the communities. The role of faith and spiritual support was conveyed through the involvement of volunteers in the every-day activities of *Het Open Hof* (OH). The position of the day-care center for the homeless was seen as a spiritual and ethical extension of self-organized processes, which offer a crucial environment for a stream of social activities.

The executive coordinator is also a reverend, a street pastor. This means that she goes out on the street, walk to people and talk with them about issues of life. Of course, this shows the fact that we are a Christian organization... and it is one of the facts that make us stronger. (Volunteer-coordinator, Open Hof)

The role of the spiritual caregiver was to outreach people in need and discuss together topics of religion, faith and other non-faith related concerns. Those findings supported the vision that faith-based community organizations can provide a certain form of intervention in cities, based not merely on religious concerns but on humanistic intentions. Hence, the case showed that the processes of USO rely on the perception of self-involvement of individuals toward manifestation of an action that contributes to a construction of an improved social reality.

USO as a socio-spatial process of proximity

Within all the case studies an emphasis was placed on the role of proximity in shaping the processes of self-organization. The case studies were based in diverse social and spatial settings, which revealed unique characteristics and specific chain of events. However, the results illustrated that some similarities are at any rate very much apparent.

Due to its epistemic features, RIA attracted different social groups and stakeholders who otherwise might not cooperate, such as artists, activists, neighborhood committees, policy advisers and representatives of housing corporations. For illustrative purposes, we can depict all of the aforementioned as activators, advocates, opponents and proponents of intended planning interventions. Evidence shows that the main goal of RIA was to exchange knowledge and create awareness with the less privileged members of society over the disparities resulting from the local housing policy agenda in the past.

Several times residents told us that representatives of the housing corporation and the municipality came to their homes, with an interpreter and told them 'this is the only option you have. We offer you X amount of money and a temporary place to stay. Then you can return to the new house'. (Core group activist, RIA)

It is not surprising that RIA scaled up from a group that intended to assist those who do not have equal access to housing to a wider citizen platform incorporated in the inclusive agenda of local and regional institutions.

The role of local context and localized social relations has been also assigned to the members of the SES. SES aimed to increase the face-to-face interaction and social cohesion in an already existing geographical territory, illustrating that the processes of USO cannot only be explained by the distribution of individuals over space. The data on the OH suggested that USO refers to the social propinquity experienced in communities. Whereas the day center operated in the city of Groningen, its spatial base was only the origin of the societal response it triggered. Some deeds within the OH relied on the commencement of feelings of self-realization, and beliefs in shared humanistic ideals and their expressions in urban life.

What we do is really simple. Our core business is just giving them [people in need] a place where they can stay a couple of hours, [have] coffee, and a little bit [of] love. Anybody can do it. We do not need any school, or any education, or special skills to do that. Not really! (Volunteer-coordinator, Open Hof)

What holds together these three distinct examples is the cognitive knowledge that is related to the social and spatial proximity which the individuals share. Social gathering, as seen in the cases, related to the features that geographically delimited locations provide, but not only. If we consider that USO is a pivotal basis for participatory practices, it

cannot be justified solely as a territorially anchored process. It also requires consideration of assets that are beyond the spatially delimited aspects of society, relating to a combination of social and psychological factors.

USO as collective intentionality

Perhaps our most challenging task in this article was to elucidate the role of collective intentionality within the processes of USO. The purpose of referring to collective intentionality is essential to grasp the socio-psychological capacities of USO. Ascribing socio-psychological features to the processes of USO implies that it is more a local socio-psychological phenomenon than a global state of affairs. The reason for this distinction is hidden in the internalization of common norms that can occur in specific, case-based situations and difficult to demonstrate at the global scale.

In all the case studies, a central place has been given to intentions that suggest altruistic activities related to the promotion of improved quality of life in different areas of urban life. RIA emerged as a group of volunteers who were willing to share experiences and knowledge on a specific topic. The OH was primarily a place where people in need can shelter and receive spiritual support. The SES was established as a *habitus* where interpersonal relationships can flourish. Although independent these examples were driven by one common feature of collective intentionality – the idea of creating an improved and inclusive social environment, where every member of the community can pull together with like-minded individuals and sustain a collective social performance.

For example, it appeared that the term ‘social gardening’ referred to the process of socialization between different members of SES rather than the gardening itself.

[...]We go there every day, but for gardening only once or twice monthly. We go there with the whole family and if we see a neighbor there, we talk [to them]. If we don't have this garden how we can contact the neighbors? (Core group member, SES, non-western origin)

Fundamental to the functional operation of OH were the volunteers, who were not necessarily with a religious background or motivation (Open Hof Groningen).

In our genesis, there are the volunteers. Now we have about 80–90 volunteers and half of them do not have religious background. This threatens our image as religious organization, but the fact that we have so many volunteers says something about us. (Volunteer-coordinator, Open Hof)

This result, although unexpected for a faith-based help-group, was not entirely surprising. Relying on volunteering could be seen as self-organized capacity expressed through particular deeds of collective intentionality. Volunteering naturally was considered as a non-coercive action of individuals in sharing a concern for other people, consequently a particular type of selflessness induced not by authorities but built on personal skill and qualities. If we assume that the volunteers of OH shared a particular selflessness in their work, then they employ collective intentions within their actions. Collective intentionality could be traced in the efforts of the volunteers in communicating a positive sentiment that there was and still is a need to support the underprivileged members of the society. The work of the volunteers provided new meaning to processes of self-organization and therefore in its implication within participatory practices.

USO in relation to planning

Our findings reveal that USO can play a crucial role in initiating, promoting, advocating and sustaining civilian input in decision-making agendas, in a non-orthodox manner. The analysis of the case studies shows that although USO is seen as area place-based phenomenon, it can be extrapolated and applied to other territorial developments that share similar concerns. For example, RIA started in 2007 as a protest against intended plans and interventions and now is a sector-based platform in Rotterdam, which operates in different neighborhoods. According to the RIA website, as of September 2013, RIA is a resident platform that includes various neighborhood associations of Rotterdam, squatters, architects and linked with the Dutch Association of Tenants.

On the other side of The Netherlands, SES is used as an example of a successful small-scale, self-initiated citizen initiative which heralds an innovative approach to advertise citizen participation in times of state withdrawal from the planning agenda.

It is very important that the citizens have to do it themselves. We do not have official rules. If people want to do something for themselves, they can approach us for assistance. (Senior policy advisor, Municipality of Groningen)

Sch findings illustrate to a degree the role of changing discourses of urban governance in participatory thinking, but also highlight the role of individuals who mobilize and invest context-specific socio-spatial qualities in their actions. The empirical evidence shows that processes of USO are neither contemporary phenomena nor a superior type of locally anchored community action. However, the perception of the self-organizing processes has been changed, both in planning theory and practice. Understanding of USO within planning is shifting toward more comprehensive influences and determinants of construal socio-psychological aspects that require collective action. Within our research we try to explore a selection of these socio-psychological traits of USO. We certainly agree that there might be other personality traits that can be used in explanation of self-organizing processes.

Conclusion

The principal goal of this article was to investigate the value of collective intentionality for understanding the role of USO in contemporary discussions in planning practice. The most powerful message of this investigation is that the processes of USO do not have a unique recipe for delivering participation, yet it introduces innovative participatory intentions within planning practice. As a consequence, we discern three major findings based on the analytical inquires and the empirical referents.

The first relates to the capacity of self-organizing processes to create and maintain the dynamics of community formation in finding non-traditional patterns for citizen participation. The second relates the processes of USO with features of socio-spatial proximity observed in urban networks that underline belonging not only to a place but also to a cause. The third finding is that the processes of USO stimulate and engage context-specific collective awareness, consciousness and behavior that can be captured through the notions of collective intentionality.

This article highlights the relevance of USO as a socio-spatially anchored phenomenon and the distinctive role collective intentionality has in its occurrence. The aim is not to set up a complete and final explanation of the processes of USO but to open avenues in its comprehension in planning theory and practice. The processes of USO are neither a

distinctive form of community organization nor a new type of grassroots formation. The value of USO lies in the potential it provides for recognition of collective intentionality that triggers the voluntary or the community sector. In comparison to the public and the private sector, the community sector is gaining influence within planning.

The processes of USO are a unique catalyst of social change and an organic predecessor of participation. The empirical findings show that local authorities have entertained notions of self-organizing as a decision-making device. Processes of self-organization facilitate more responsibilities for communities in the execution of participatory measures and allow a wide spectrum of possibilities for capacity development and experimentation in a relatively 'harmless' domains of community engagement. Whether or not this is an isolated case or part of a global phenomenon requires further investigation. At any rate, the examples nurture the prosperous position of USO in the changing realities of urban governance.

The case studies articulate different reasons for their inclusive character and followed different patterns of development. As in many other community-based models of participation, the examples also build on the impression that proactive change in the environment relies on the intrinsic features of communities. Processes of self-organization are not exempt from this behavioral pattern. For example, in SES, we observe that there has long been a condition that required active social engagement. The idea to enhance social cohesion and embeddedness came from residents, rather than receiving external impulses from policy makers. Self-organized social groups aim to accommodate specific competences outside the standard toolbox of participatory measures, such as relationship building, strategic influencing, tolerance and continuous learning. The activities envisioned and enacted by RIA and OH illustrate how such socio-psychological competences and abilities are integrated in USO.

The results suggest that the processes of USO are applicable to small-scale initiatives due to role of the local environment and the socio-spatial proximity between the individuals. However, our findings also suggest that self-organizing capacities of communities can extend outside their primary geographical foci and that can also build the foundation of inclusive sector-based initiatives. Even so, the extent to which communities self-organize depends on the actual ideological and socio-economic peculiarities of social reality. In doing so, processes of USO can provide insight into the performance of multifaceted urban networks in a participatory context.

Following this train of thought, the processes of USO require deeper investigation into the socio-psychological traits of citizen participation, more specifically the importance of collective intentionality. Being aware and knowing your rights and obligations is not enough to stimulate action in the absence of shared intention for collective performance. The notion of collective intentionality shines as an alternative basis for explanation, which still requires further exploration and analysis. Our results suggest that deeds of collective intentionality can assist in exploration of the ontological and epistemological foundations of self-organization. In this manner, collective intentionality helps us explain why and how the processes of USO occur in the public domain, rather than labelling USO as an unpredictable, yet valuable, component of complex urban systems. Deeper investigation on the role of collective intentionality in self-organizing processes is required, especially with regard to different dimensions of planning.

A number of important limitations need to be considered. First, the processes of USO do not consider the discrepancy between individual and collective agendas of action. Setting an agenda for collective action requires resilient organizational and personal skills. In addition, where organizational skills are involved, there is a risk of creating an informal

hierarchy, control and manipulation of the dynamics within a group. Second, the empirical analysis shows that the processes of USO often occur as a reaction to plans imposed from above. The case studies show that USO does not necessarily emerge as a completely new setup, but also in opposition to a strictly controlled institutional environment. With regard to the ideologies of collective intentionality embedded in the construction of USO, it can be argued that any notion of intentionality, either shared or singular, opens discussion not only for determining whether USO can be intentional or not but also questioning the certitude of collective action and performance. Unfortunately, this investigation was not sufficient in addressing this question and leaves room for improvement.

Regarding the implication of USO in urban planning, we could not avoid the relevance of the interplay between emerging local initiatives and flexible local institutions, underlined earlier by Boonstra and Boelens (2011), and more recently Boonstra (2015). Our findings suggest that increasingly practitioners allow space for institutional manoeuvre to accommodate the processes of self-organization as a means of inclusive effort in planning. However, this statement is valid only when applied to rather harmless and non-contested domains, such as social gardening and outreach to people in need. When it comes to critical and politically contested initiatives, such as RIA, it seems that there is limited room for trial-and-error experimentation, which confirms that even processes of USO cannot avoid complex power relations. Nevertheless, we move away from portrayal of USO as a preconditioned setting in urban governance. We outline a dynamic perception of self-organization and its sensory properties. We consider that the processes of USO are deepening the role of socio-psychological features of participation, which seems to matter the most.

The place of socio-psychological traits, such as collective intentionality, in defining the social and intimate importance of USO, has not yet been explored sufficiently well. The agenda of urban development should be directed toward analyzing human interactions, collective action and social embeddedness which the processes of self-organizations aim to combine. Recognizing the self-organizing capacities of the urban population can be seen as a shift from simply being an object reflected on by top-down managers into being an active trigger for new dimensions in engaging the public in planning. On that account, we take it that the intellectual and operational emergence of USO is crucial for academic research in equal measure as it is for urban practice and management. This is not to say that our findings are the final word on USO as a priori knowledge or justification of socio-psychological aspects of participation. On the contrary, we believe that the intellectual investigation of USO creates exciting prospects for further research.

Where should such research focus? Admittedly, there is a gap in the literature concerning the socio-spatial relationships between the processes of USO, collective intentionality, participatory planning and urban governance. New critical inquiries need to differentiate between alternative forms of self-governance (self-regulation and self-management) in terms of 'initiative', 'action' and 'result'. Ismael (2011) provides a twofold distinction between self-organization and self-governance observed within the field of human and social sciences, but any nuanced typology of self-governance would require sensitivity to intentionality and not ignore those instances where USO occurs without intent but where collectivity results. It would be crucial to better conceptualize and understand USO as a multiscale phenomenon to avoid making only reference to those examples at 'lower' or more local levels of governance. Collective intentionality represents only one of the many socio-psychological traits for understanding USO. More research should be directed in revealing the role of such traits in collective processes of self-organization.

Furthermore, work should concentrate on the impact of semi-informal and informal self-organized initiatives in relation to different aspects of local governance dynamics. Knowledge of the self-organizing processes of the urban is based primarily on practices of the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic context, where the institutional setting is dominated by statist administrative practices and constraints. As a result, informal and unorthodox patterns of societal action appear innovative and creative. It would be interesting therefore to assess the effects of collective intentionality and the processes of USO outside the context of the neoliberal and conservative North. In places where the institutional and structural framework is characterized by low levels of state control and high levels of self-initiation, it would be fascinating to discover what USO stands for and possibly means in theory and practice.

If we revisit the central question posed at the outset, it is adequate to say that USO as a socially constructed phenomenon invested with socio-psychological traits relies on community organizing, features of proximity and collective intentionality. Moreover, understanding the processes of USO requires, in our view, a commitment to urban change and the role of self-organizing capacities of the urban. USO symbolizes the values that individuals engage in via collective action, and it is the job of the planners to translate these values into practice.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the two anonymous referees for their comments on earlier versions of this article. The research has been part of Mustafa Hasanov's Individual Research Training (IRT) as a core component of his Research Master. The IRT was conducted between March and November 2012 in the wider framework of the EU 7th Framework Marie Curie Staff Exchange URBANSELF project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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